

The Book of Colossians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 8: Free from Legalism and False Religion

Colossians 2:16–23

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This is one of the most doctrinally important passages in the letter for our heritage, and it must be taught with both clarity and warmth. Paul applies the truth of 2:14 (the Old Law nailed to the cross) to concrete practices: food and drink laws, festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths. He declares them a shadow of the things to come whose substance belongs to Christ. The teacher's central doctrinal task is to establish that these elements of the Old Law are fulfilled in Christ and no longer bind the Christian, and therefore that no one may rightly impose them, or condemn a believer for not keeping them. This includes the Sabbath. The seventh-day Sabbath was part of the old covenant given to Israel; it was a shadow fulfilled in Christ. The first day of the week, the Lord's Day, on which the church gathers to break bread and worship (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Revelation 1:10), is not a Christian Sabbath, and Christians are not bound by Old Covenant Sabbath regulations. Handle this point plainly and lovingly, answering Sabbatarian teaching from the text.

Paul also exposes two related errors the teacher should name: the binding of human religious rules as though they carried God's authority (Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch, according to human precepts), and asceticism, the idea that severity to the body produces holiness. Paul says such practices have an appearance of wisdom but no value in checking the flesh. The teacher should show that real transformation comes not from external rules and self-punishment but from holding fast to the Head, Christ, from whom the whole body grows. This guards students against both legalism and the false confidence that rule-keeping breeds.

The formational aim is freedom and discernment. Paul wants believers neither crushed by others' man-made standards nor proud of their own, but free in Christ, fixed on the substance rather than the shadow, and pursuing a holiness that flows from union with Christ rather than from a checklist. Aim the lesson there. Send students home free from false guilt, slow to judge one another on matters of liberty, alert to human rules masquerading as God's commands, and confident that real change comes from Christ the Head.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul says, let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath, for these are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ (vv. 16–17). What does it mean that these observances were a

shadow, and why does the coming of Christ, the substance, free believers from being bound to them?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul names specific observances the false teachers were pressing: food and drink, festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths. These are the calendar and dietary regulations of the old covenant. His verdict is striking and freeing: let no one pass judgment on you regarding them.

The key is the shadow and substance image. A shadow is real, but it is not the thing itself; it is cast by a body and points to it. The old covenant observances were a shadow of the things to come, genuinely given by God, but designed to point forward to Christ. Now that the substance, Christ, has come, the shadow has served its purpose.

Help students see the logic. You do not keep staring at and serving the shadow once the reality has arrived. To insist on the old observances now is, in effect, to act as though Christ had not yet come, to prefer the silhouette to the person. The observances are not evil; they are simply fulfilled and obsolete as binding law (Hebrews 10:1; 8:13).

This frees believers in two directions: from the obligation to keep these things, and from condemnation for not keeping them. No one has the right to impose the shadow on those who possess the substance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Food laws, festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths as old covenant observances
- Shadow and substance: the observances pointed forward to Christ and are fulfilled in Him
- Insisting on the shadow now as acting as though Christ had not come
- Freedom both from the obligation and from condemnation for not keeping them

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that these observances were a shadow of things to come?
- Why does the arrival of Christ, the substance, free us from being bound to the shadow?
- How does this protect believers from being condemned over food, drink, and days?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul refuses to let others enslave the Colossians with their rules. Where do you tend to let other people's expectations or man-made standards put you under a cloud of guilt? Or, turning it around, where are you tempted to sit in judgment over fellow Christians on matters where God has left us free?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question presses the truth in two directions, because the legalistic impulse runs both ways. On one side, we let others' man-made standards put us under a cloud of guilt; on the other, we set ourselves up as judges of fellow believers on matters where God has left us free.

Help students examine the first tendency. Many sincere Christians carry low-grade guilt manufactured by someone else's rules, traditions, or expectations that God never imposed. Paul says, do not let anyone do that to you. Freedom in Christ includes freedom from the tyranny of others' opinions on matters of liberty.

Then examine the second tendency, which is often harder to see in ourselves. It is easy to attach spiritual weight to our own preferences, customs, or convictions on disputable matters and then quietly judge those who differ (Romans 14). Encourage students to identify one place they are being judged unfairly and one place they are doing the judging, and to seek the freedom and the charity Paul commends.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Legalism running both ways: bearing others' rules and judging others by ours
- Freedom from manufactured guilt over matters God never bound
- The danger of attaching spiritual weight to mere preferences (Romans 14)
- Pursuing both freedom for ourselves and charity toward others

Discussion Prompts

- Where do others' expectations put you under guilt God never imposed?
- Where might you be judging fellow Christians on matters of liberty?
- How do we hold our convictions firmly without binding them on others?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul warns against teachers who promote false humility and the worship of angels, who are puffed up and not holding fast to the Head (vv. 18–19). What does it mean to hold fast to the Head, and how can practices that look humble and spiritual actually pull us away from Christ rather than toward Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul exposes the false teachers further in verses 18 and 19. They promote a false humility, traffic in the worship of angels and visions, and are actually puffed up by their sensuous minds. Note the irony: their supposed humility is a mask for spiritual pride. They look lowly and devout while being inflated with self-importance.

The decisive diagnosis comes at the end: they are not holding fast to the Head. This is the heart of the matter. Whatever spiritual experiences and practices they boast in, they have lost their

grip on Christ Himself. And Paul says it is only from the Head that the whole body grows. Cut off from Christ, no amount of religious activity produces real life.

Help students see how practices that look humble and spiritual can actually pull us away from Christ. Anything that puts a mediator, an experience, a technique, or a human authority between us and Christ, or that makes our spiritual life depend on something other than Him, loosens our grip on the Head, however pious it appears.

Holding fast to the Head means keeping Christ central and primary, depending directly on Him, refusing every supplement that would displace Him. The test of any practice is whether it strengthens or weakens that grip.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- False humility as a mask for spiritual pride
- Worship of angels, visions, and self-importance as counterfeits of true devotion
- The decisive failure: not holding fast to the Head, Christ
- Life and growth flowing only from union with Christ the Head

Discussion Prompts

- How can practices that look humble actually be expressions of pride?
- What does it mean to hold fast to the Head?
- How can a spiritual-sounding practice end up pulling us away from Christ?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul says health comes from holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body grows. What things in your life tend to loosen your grip on Christ, drawing your attention to experiences, personalities, or practices instead of to Him directly? How do you stay connected to the Head?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question takes holding fast to the Head and makes it personal and practical. The danger Paul describes is not always crude; it is often a subtle shift of attention away from Christ Himself toward something adjacent to Him: a charismatic personality, a powerful experience, a method, a movement, a set of practices.

Help students notice where their attention and dependence actually rest. Is their spiritual life centered on Christ, or has it quietly become centered on a teacher they admire, a feeling they chase, or a routine they trust? These things may be good servants but make terrible heads.

Then move toward how we stay connected to the Head: through the ordinary, Christ-centered means He has given, the word, prayer, the Lord's Supper, the fellowship of the body, all of which

point us to Him rather than to themselves. Encourage students to name one thing that has been loosening their grip on Christ and one practice that would help them hold fast to Him directly this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Subtle drift of attention from Christ to something adjacent to Him
- Good things (teachers, experiences, routines) as poor substitutes for the Head
- Christ-centered means of grace that point us to Him rather than themselves
- Naming what loosens our grip and what strengthens it

Discussion Prompts

- What tends to draw your attention away from Christ Himself?
- Has your spiritual life quietly centered on something other than the Head?
- What practice helps you hold fast to Christ directly?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul asks, if with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why do you submit to its regulations as if you still belonged to it (v. 20)? What does it mean that we have died with Christ to the old system of rule-keeping, and how should that death shape the way we relate to such rules now?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul presses a powerful argument in verse 20: if with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to its regulations? Building on the death-and-resurrection of 2:11–13, Paul reasons that believers have died to the whole old system of rule-keeping and worldly principles. To submit to it again is to live as though that death never happened.

Help students grasp the logic of having died to something. A dead person is no longer under the jurisdiction of the old order. We died with Christ to the elemental principles, the rudimentary regulations, that governed the old age. They no longer have authority over us. To go back under them is to put on grave clothes we were meant to leave in the tomb.

Stress that this is not a license to sin (Paul will give plenty of commands in chapter 3); it is freedom from a particular kind of bondage: the system that tries to relate to God through external regulations and the basic principles of the world rather than through the risen Christ.

Apply it: our relationship with God is no longer mediated by a code of do-not-touch regulations. We relate to Him as those raised with Christ, living from union with Him, not as those still trying to satisfy the old order's demands.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Having died with Christ to the old system of rule-keeping and worldly principles
- The inconsistency of submitting again to what we died to
- Freedom from external-regulation religion, not freedom to sin
- Relating to God as those raised with Christ rather than under the old order

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that we died with Christ to the elemental principles of the world?
- Why is going back under those regulations like wearing grave clothes again?
- How is this freedom different from a license to sin?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul assumes we can drift back into living under rules we were freed from. What man-made religious rules or traditions have you, at some point, treated as though they carried the authority of God's commands? How do you tell the difference between God's commands and human additions?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question makes verse 20 concrete by asking what man-made rules we have treated as though they were God's commands. This is a delicate but important exercise, because the line between God's commands and human additions is exactly where legalism does its damage.

Help students think carefully. There are God's clear commands, which bind all Christians. There are wise applications and personal convictions, which may guide an individual or a family but should not be bound on others. And there are human traditions sometimes mistaken for divine commands. The danger is elevating the second or third category to the authority of the first.

Give them a working test: can this rule be shown from the New Testament as a command of God, or is it a human tradition, preference, or inference treated as if it were? Jesus rebuked those who taught as doctrines the commandments of men (Matthew 15:9). Encourage humility here; the point is not to throw off God's actual commands but to stop binding human ones, and to stop carrying guilt over rules God never gave.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Distinguishing God's commands from human traditions and personal convictions
- The danger of elevating preferences or inferences to the authority of God's commands
- Jesus' rebuke of teaching human precepts as doctrines (Matthew 15:8-9)
- Humility: rejecting human rules without throwing off God's actual commands

Discussion Prompts

- What human rule have you, at some point, treated as a command of God?
- How do you test whether a rule is God's command or a human addition?
- How do we reject legalism without becoming careless about real commands?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul says the rules Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch have an appearance of wisdom and severity to the body, but are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh (vv. 21–23). Why are external rules and harsh self-denial ultimately powerless to make a person holy, and what does this teach us about where real transformation comes from?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

In verses 21 to 23 Paul quotes the slogans of the false teachers, Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch, and delivers his verdict. Such rules, he says, refer to things that perish with use, rest on human precepts, and though they have an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion, humility, and severity to the body, they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

This is a profound statement about why legalism and asceticism fail. They operate from the outside in, trying to restrain sin by external prohibition and bodily severity. But sin lives deeper than that, in the heart. You can starve the body and chain the hands while the heart remains proud, lustful, bitter, and self-righteous. Indeed, harsh self-denial often feeds spiritual pride, the worst sin of all.

Help students see the appearance of wisdom. Strict rules and visible self-denial look impressive and feel spiritual. People admire them, and the practitioner feels he is making real progress. But Paul says it is of no value against the flesh. The flesh is not defeated by rules; it often hides behind them.

Where, then, does real transformation come from? From the opposite direction, the inside out, from union with the risen Christ, the renewal of the heart, the work of God in those who hold fast to the Head. Chapter 3 will spell this out: we put off and put on, not by self-punishment, but by living from our death and resurrection with Christ, setting our minds on things above.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Why legalism and asceticism fail: they work from the outside in, but sin lives in the heart
- Self-denial that looks impressive yet feeds spiritual pride
- The appearance of wisdom versus actual power against the flesh
- Real transformation from union with the risen Christ, the inside out (anticipating chapter 3)

Discussion Prompts

- Why are external rules and harsh self-denial powerless to make us holy?
- How can severe self-denial actually feed pride rather than defeat sin?
- Where does real transformation of the heart come from?

Question 8

Student Question:

Many of us have tried to defeat a sin mainly by piling up rules and restrictions, only to find the sin still alive underneath. Where have you tried to fight a sin from the outside in, by regulation, when the real battle was in your heart? What would fighting it from the inside out, in Christ, look like?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question takes the failure of rule-religion into the believer's own battle with sin. Most of us have, at some point, tried to defeat a sin mainly by piling up external restrictions, only to find the sin still alive beneath them, or simply displaced into another form.

Help students recognize the pattern in their own lives: trying to fight lust by mere avoidance while never addressing the heart's desires, trying to fight overeating or overspending by rigid rules that eventually snap, trying to fight anger by suppression rather than by dealing with what feeds it. External controls have their place as wise fences, but they are not the cure.

Then point to the better way Paul is leading toward: fighting from the inside out, in Christ. This means bringing the heart's desires to Christ, setting the mind on things above, putting to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit, and replacing sinful appetites with deeper satisfaction in Him. Encourage students to name one sin they have been fighting only from the outside and one inside-out step they could take in Christ this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Fighting sin only from the outside in, by restriction
- External controls as useful fences but not the cure
- Fighting from the inside out: heart, mind, and union with Christ
- Replacing sinful appetites with deeper satisfaction in Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you tried to defeat a sin only by external rules?
- Why did the sin survive underneath the rules?
- What would fighting that sin from the inside out, in Christ, look like?

Question 9

Student Question:

Among the things Paul lists is the Sabbath, calling it part of the shadow now fulfilled in Christ (vv. 16–17). What does this teach about the place of the Old Law's Sabbaths, festivals, and food laws under the new covenant? And how should Christians understand the first day of the week, the Lord's Day, on which the church gathers (Acts 20:7), which Scripture never treats as a Christian Sabbath bound by Old Covenant rules?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinally weightiest question of the lesson, and it should be taught plainly, confidently, and lovingly. Paul lists the Sabbath among the shadows now fulfilled in Christ (vv. 16–17). This has direct bearing on Sabbatarian teaching and on how Christians understand the Lord's Day, so the teacher should be ready to handle it from the text.

First, establish the place of the Sabbath in God's plan. The seventh-day Sabbath was given as part of the old covenant with Israel, a sign between God and that nation (Exodus 31:13–17). Like the festivals, new moons, and food laws Paul lists alongside it, it was a shadow pointing forward to Christ. With the Old Law nailed to the cross (2:14) and fulfilled in Christ (Matthew 5:17), its Sabbath regulations no longer bind the Christian. This is why Paul can say plainly, let no one pass judgment on you with regard to a Sabbath. Compare Galatians 4:10–11 and Romans 14:5–6, where Paul refuses to bind the observance of days.

Second, address the Lord's Day clearly. The New Testament shows the church gathering on the first day of the week to break bread and worship (Acts 20:7), with giving set for the first day (1 Corinthians 16:2), and John calls it the Lord's Day (Revelation 1:10). This is the apostolic pattern for Christian assembly, and the Lord's Supper is a weekly act of worship on that day (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26). But the first day is not a Christian Sabbath. The New Testament never transfers the Sabbath law to Sunday, never calls Sunday a Sabbath, and never imposes Old Covenant Sabbath rest-regulations on the Lord's Day. We gather on the first day to worship the risen Lord, not to keep a rebranded seventh-day law.

Third, draw the larger principle, which is the real point of the passage. The Old Law as a whole, its food laws, its calendar, its Sabbaths, has been fulfilled and removed in Christ, and Christians live under the new covenant in His blood (Hebrews 8–10). Therefore no one may bind these old observances, and no one may invent new human rules and bind them either. The error Paul confronts is the same in every age: taking regulations God has not given (or has fulfilled and set aside) and imposing them as the measure of true spirituality.

Finally, guard the balance pastorally. Freedom from the Sabbath law is not freedom to neglect the worship God has actually appointed. Christians are commanded not to forsake the assembling of themselves together (Hebrews 10:25), and the apostolic pattern is gathering on the first day of the week. So we hold two truths together: we are free from the Old Covenant Sabbath and all the shadow-observances, and we gladly keep the New Testament pattern of

worship on the Lord's Day, not as anxious law-keepers, but as those who delight to come together around the risen Christ, the substance to which every shadow pointed.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The seventh-day Sabbath as part of the old covenant given to Israel, a shadow fulfilled in Christ (Exodus 31:13–17; Matthew 5:17)
- The Old Law's Sabbaths, festivals, and food laws no longer binding the Christian (Galatians 4:10–11; Romans 14:5–6; Hebrews 8–10)
- The first day of the week as the apostolic pattern of Christian assembly and the Lord's Supper (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Revelation 1:10)
- The Lord's Day is not a Christian Sabbath: Scripture never transfers Sabbath law or rest-regulations to Sunday
- The general principle: no binding of fulfilled old observances or invented human rules as the measure of spirituality
- Freedom from the Sabbath law alongside faithful keeping of the appointed New Testament worship (Hebrews 10:25)

Discussion Prompts

- Why is the Sabbath listed among the shadows that are fulfilled in Christ?
- What is the difference between keeping the Lord's Day and keeping a Christian Sabbath?
- How would you lovingly answer someone who insists Christians must keep the seventh-day Sabbath?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this passage. Paul tears down the whole structure of rule-religion and points us back to Christ, the substance, the Head, the source of real life. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses. What is the single truth from Colossians 2:16–23 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the passage: Paul tears down the structure of rule-religion and points back to Christ, the substance, the Head, the source of real life. The student's task is to name one specific way Christ is forming them through it.

Walk back through the movement as a prompt. Some students most need release from false guilt manufactured by others' rules. Some need to stop judging fellow believers on matters of liberty. Some need to recognize a human tradition they have treated as God's command. Some need to stop fighting sin from the outside in and start holding fast to the Head. Let each name what meets them.

Close by reminding students that the goal is formation, not information. Paul wrote so that free people would live free, fixed on the substance rather than the shadow. Invite each to carry one truth into the week and to fix their eyes afresh on Christ, the reality that every rule and shadow was only ever pointing toward.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The collapse of rule-religion and the return to Christ as the lesson's arc
- Formation, not mere information, as the goal
- Carrying one concrete truth into the week
- Fixing the eyes on the substance, Christ, rather than the shadow

Discussion Prompts

- Which truth from this passage most needs to take root in you this week?
- Where do you most need to trade the shadow for the substance, Christ?
- How can this group help you live free, holding fast to the Head, in the days ahead?